WASHINGTON - Pentagon strategists are quietly formulating plans that could conceivably drag the United States into an African racial war. Here are the inside details:

Most of the oil consumed by the West is shipped in tankers which steam through the Indian Ocean and around South Africa's Cape of Good Hope. The Soviet Union has been building up its fleet in the Indian Ocean and defense planners now believe the Kremlin could easily disrupt the tanker traffic.

Thus, the United States, in concert with its NATO allies, is proposing to defend the "Cape Route" from the alleged Russian threat. Such plans would undoubtedly require the cooperation of White-ruled South Africa.

NATO officials admitted several months ago that "contingency plans" were being drawn up. Recent reports from South Africa, furthermore, tell of naval visits by the British and French. And U.S. officials are reportedly discussing plans to use South African port facilities.

Once military cooperation is established, NATO could eventually be drawn into South Africa's escalating racial squabbles with its black neighbors.

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There is a strong possibility, however, that the "Cape Route" issue is a bogus one. A recent United Nations report, classified confidential, traces the controversy back to conservative NATO officials who for years have been looking for an excuse to include South Africa in the western defense system.

The U.N. document, compiled by consultant Sean Gervasi, concluded: "The debate about the Cape Route...is actually a smokescreen for hiding the real motives of those who organized it."

A secret U.S. foreign policy document on Southern Africa, National Security Study Memorandum 39, bluntly acknowledges that South Africa "hopes to use the small but persistent Soviet naval presence in the Indian Ocean as a basis for some sort of collaboration with the US....with resultant increased U.S. naval presence in the area and use of South African ports."

Finally, there is the testimony of no less an authority than Central Intelligence Agency Director William Colby. In a closed-door session with a congressional committee two months ago, he described the Soviet presence in the Indian Ocean as "relatively small and ina There was little chance, Colby added, that the Russians would increase the size of their fleet in those waters unless the United States did it first.

No Deal: Perhaps sometimes investigative reporters should give the public a report on a scandal they have failed to find.

We have been bombarded with inquiries, for example, about Richard Nixon's presidential pardon. Many suspicious Americans refuse to believe President Ford's explanation before the House Judiciary Committee that he thought the pardon would close the book on Watergate. They suspect there must have been a deal between Nixon and Ford.

For several weeks, we have been searching for evidence of such a deal. We have questioned trusted sources who are close to both Nixon and Ford. One source was actually present at San Clemente during the discussions that led to the pardon.

But if there was an advance agreement between Nixonn and Ford, we have found no evidence of it. We haven't uncovered one document, we haven't located one witness, with information about a Nixon-Ford deal.

In the absence of any evidence to the contrary, we will accept President Ford's word that he pardoned Richard Nixon because he thought it was the right thing to do. We question Ford's judgment, but we have no reason to question his integrity.

Nato Communists? Secret intelligence reports warn that two Western nations, both members of the Atlantic Alliance, are in danger of a Communist takeover. They are Italy and Portugal.

Italy is already at the brink of economic collapse. The Communist party is emerging as the country's strongest, most disciplined political group.

Intelligence reports note that the Communists are also highly sophisticated. They have toned down the inflammatory propaganda of the past and are proposing instead a foreign policy that would be neither anti-American nor anti-Soviet.

The intelligence reports predict that the Communists will begin to share power with the ruling Christian Democrats and then will gradually increase their power.

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